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FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4710  
INFO RUCNSAD/SADC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0888

UNCLAS ANTANANARIVO 000417

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
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DEPT FOR AF/E, AF/FO, INR/AA, AND DRL  
DEPT FOR DS/IP/AF CKOLLMAR  
PARIS FOR D'ELIA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [MA](#)  
SUBJECT: Opposition Leaders Arrested; Merina Flee Tulear

REF: ANTANANARIVO 414

¶1. (SBU) Police in Tulear arrested four opposition leaders for allegedly leading the demonstrations which turned violent in the city April 27 (reftel): Senator Robert Razaka; National Assembly Deputy Dimby Benaria; Luc Vital, Chairman of the Tulear Communal Council; and Tsimarivo Railala. The four are reportedly charged with inciting violence and disturbing public order. An additional unnamed businessman who was wanted by police for his involvement in the riots turned himself in April 30. At present Tulear is calm with no demonstrations and other coastal cities of Tamatave, Majunga, and Diego Suarez are quiet, although rumors are spreading that demonstrations are planned.

Highlanders Seek Army Protection, Flee Tulear  
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¶2. (SBU) Military sources reported that over 100 "Merina" sought refuge over the weekend at the military base in Tulear after mob attacks targeted them (reftel). The Merina are highland people from the Antananarivo area; President Ravalomanana and a large proportion of GOM officials are Merina. Five Merina families are reported to have already fled Tulear for Antananarivo in two buses and a truck.

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT: Tension between the coastal peoples (known as "cotiers") and highlanders (most prominently the Merina) have existed since before colonial times when the Merina established dominance over the island. That said, even during the 2002 governance crisis, the differences between Merina and coastal peoples were more often frustrations to be exploited for political purposes than any kind of genuine ethnic hatred. Most Malagasy are ambivalent about ethnic differences, inter-marry, speak the same language, and travel or reside throughout the country. Nonetheless, these ethnic fault lines could become drawn more sharply if the government, perceived as Merina-dominated, does not address several contentious coastal issues effectively. This would include the problem of power supply to cities on the coast and the handling of the corruption trial of Roland Ratsiraka, the mayor of the port city of Tamatave. END COMMENT.

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